

## **But What If They Don't Believe Me?**

This week we begin reading from the second Book of the Torah, known in English as the Book of Exodus and in Hebrew as *Shemot* ("names"). It is in this book that Moses is introduced and throughout the remainder of the Torah Moses is the protagonist, the central figure. As you are quite familiar, Moses is the leader and teacher, the hero who will confront Pharaoh, and the prophet who will bring to the Children of Israel God's inspired revelation. Moses guides the people through the Sea of Reed and then for 40 years in the Sinai Peninsula. He is the brave general against the terrorist tribe of Amalek and is the compassionate brother who prays for healing. He holds strong and firm against rebels and is consoling and inspiring to the people when their energy and spirit flags. He is considered the greatest leader of our people and is revered by people of many different faiths and cultures. But for all that he accomplished, when God first called out to him, Moses was so filled with self-doubt that he begged God to choose another. Here is the moment of doubt:

***Exodus 4:1*** *But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Eternal did not appear to you?"*

<sup>2</sup> *The Eternal said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A rod."*

<sup>3</sup> *God said, "Cast it on the ground." He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. <sup>4</sup> Then The Eternal said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail" -- he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand -- <sup>5</sup> "that they may believe that The Eternal, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you." <sup>6</sup> The Eternal said to him further, "Put your hand into your bosom." He [Moses] put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! <sup>7</sup> And God said, "Put your hand back into your bosom." -- He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body. -- <sup>8</sup> "And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second.*

<sup>9</sup> *And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it -- the water that you take from the Nile -- will turn to blood on the dry ground."*

<sup>10</sup> *But Moses said to The Eternal, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

*<sup>11</sup> And The Eternal said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, The Eternal? <sup>12</sup> Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say."*

*<sup>13</sup> But he [Moses] said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your messenger."*

Again and again, Moses pleaded with God to find another to carry out the Divine mission of leading the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land of our ancestors. Rabbi Benno Jacob (1869-1945), one of the leading German biblical scholars who fortunately escaped the Nazis in 1938 finding refuge in England, analyzed the five times Moses tried to object to God's call. He points out that throughout this passage, God had sought to convince Moses, not to chastise him. But in the end, the Torah has a shocking line: "The Eternal became angry with Moses" (4:14).

Angry? Yes, because it seemed that not only did Moses not believe in himself, it was if he had actually given up on himself. And giving up on yourself is akin to a self-inflicted mortal blow. It is true that Moses had suffered one set back throughout his early life and now found himself seemingly alone in the middle of desert. Nevertheless, God insisted that Moses realize that his life had meaning and purpose. Eventually, God assigns Moses's older brother Aaron to help Moses "...there is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you." So together, Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh and with the help of their sister, Miriam, led our people to freedom.

One of the lessons we can glean from this passage is that every person has moments of doubt and times when we feel overwhelmed. The tasks and responsibilities can seem beyond our capabilities. When Moses cried "what if they do not believe me," what he was also expressing was that he didn't believe in himself. In response, God reminds Moses that he has a brother; that he truly is not alone.

God's blessings are found in the good people around us: brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, friends and neighbors. God's blessings are found in the strength of a vibrant Jewish community and this synagogue where caring and compassionate people reach out to help one another on a daily basis.

Yes, there are times when circumstances get us down. There are times when we may start to doubt that we can ever get through; when one crisis follows another and then another. It is at these low points in our lives that we should remember and take heart. Even though you may have doubts, the Torah teaches that every life has meaning and significance. Indeed, if you find it hard to believe in yourself then at least believe in the strength and goodness of others. We are not alone. We are here for one another. God's blessings are found in each one of us.

***Shabbat Shalom***

***Rick***

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